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ABSTRACT

The intensive, pre-arrival training program provided by the International Catholic Migration Commission at the Philippine Refugee Processing Center in Bataan for Vietnamese, Khmer, and Lao adult refugees on route to the United States is in the process of self-examination and development. Three trends are emerging for new program directions. The first is an increased understanding of the student population, including acknowledgement of their membership in a refugee culture and increased awareness of the barriers separating teacher and student as well as basic demographic characteristics. The second trend is a shift in instructional content from primarily information-giving materials and methods to an approach providing a balance of information, skills, and attitudes. The third trend is the emerging role of the teacher as a cross-cultural trainer specializing in intercultural communication and providing a role model for students. (MSE)

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Cultural Orientation at Bataan: Merging Trends

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Cultural Orientation (CO) instruction provided by International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) at the Philippine Refugee Processing Center (PRPC) in Bataan has been undergoing an intensive re-examination for several months. The process has been a conscientious effort to step back from our daily work, to reflect on what we have done in the past and how we have done it, and to explore new ideas and tap new resources. The aim has been to ensure that CO instruction continues to provide the best preparation possible for U.S.-bound Southeast Asian refugees. In order to better understand the newer CO that is emerging, it is first necessary to examine some of the conditions that have nurtured it. This paper provides some general background information on regional CO instruction. It also identifies some major trends that are merging to form the basis of current CO thinking and efforts at Bataan.

Program Background

The regional Intensive Program as a whole is a rather remarkable effort. It represents the first time ever that the U.S. has systematically provided intensive, pre-arrival training for U.S.-bound migrants. The conditions under which training is offered are also unique. Adult participants at each of the program sites are being taught English, pre-employment skills, and cultural orientation by local national staff. In the Philippines, it is the Filipino staff who meet daily with refugee students.

Thus, within the CO component, we have the apparently incongruous situation in which Vietnamese, Khmer, and Lao adults are being taught about American culture by Filipinos in far-off Bataan. As we shall explore later, there are some inherent advantages in this particular arrangement.

At the beginning of the program, the CO component, unlike ESL, could not draw on any extensive field of literature or corps of trained professionals. CO work is perhaps best aligned with the larger field of intercultural communication. But this field itself suffers from what has been described as a lack of common definitions, a narrow theoretical/resource base, and a less than clear identity for those both in and outside the field. Moreover, while American cross-cultural trainers have worked for decades training multinational corporation managers, college graduate volunteers, or highly educated foreign nationals, they have had little or no experience dealing with the sort of individuals the Intensive Program serves. Many of the refugees being prepared for resettlement have had little or no exposure to western culture or even, for that matter, to classroom learning. Many are not literate in their own languages.

Despite these barriers, program implementors were able to agree quickly on the content focus for the CO component when they met in November 1980. The end product of that conference was a document that identified specific topics for instruction. Regional CO efforts have been guided by this document and its successors ever since. The current program guide is a list of 77 statements entitled *The Cultural Orientation Content Standards*. Implementors at each of the program sites have used these standards to develop curricula that provide teachers

FL015363

with specific information about American culture and communities and allow for a variety of classroom methods and techniques.

CO instruction is most often provided in the students' native languages, usually through assistant teachers who are themselves refugees, but who have demonstrated advanced English skills and a desire to serve as classroom intermediaries.

These, then, are the general conditions under which CO instruction has operated for several years. From the very beginning there have been a variety of opinions on different aspects of the program – specific details concerning what should be taught and how. Experience proved to be the best teacher. At Bataan, experience nurtured some major trends that now serve as the foundation for many of the newer directions in CO. Many of the ideas that are feeding into the new directions are not really new at all. Indeed, many of the best have existed at Bataan and throughout the region for some time. What is different now is the attempt to merge these various trends into a larger, encompassing framework that provides an overall rationale to guide current CO efforts.

Three major trends have influenced this framework:

- the increased understanding we have of our students;
- the shift in instructional content from primarily information-giving to one incorporating a balance of information, skills, and attitudes;
- the emerging role of the teacher as cross-cultural trainer.

Trend 1: Increased Understanding of our Students

Our understanding of the students began in the most rudimentary way – by acknowledging the differences among the major ethnic groups within the program. There are four such groups: the Vietnamese, the Khmer, the Hmong hilltribe people of Laos, and the lowland Lao. But differences based on factors other than ethnicity also proved important. Such concerns as age, sex, level of educational attainment, and ESL ability proved to be useful indicators of our students' needs. Perhaps the most useful of these non-ethnic factors was the rural/urban distinction. Staff perceived that those refugees coming from large urban environments had already been exposed to more sophisticated technology and had already acquired knowledge and skills that would continue to be functional within U.S. communities.

As we sought to better understand our students, experience revealed two other major considerations. The first of these was seeing our students as members of a refugee culture; the second, an increased awareness of the barriers that sometimes separate teacher from student.

Refugee Culture

In CO, we use the word *culture* several times each day. We refer to the culture of our students, to the culture in which we work, and to the target culture for which we are preparing our students. What do we mean by *culture* ? Here is one definition:

> Culture is an integrated system of learned behavior patterns that are characteristics of the members of any given society. Culture refers to the total way of life of particular groups of people. It includes everything that a group of people thinks, says, does, and makes – its customs, language, material artifacts and shared systems of attitudes and feelings. Culture is learned and transmitted from generation to generation. (Kohls 1979: 17)

When we are talking about a particular culture, we are talking about a particular way of life. Each of us is a member of a cultural group, and we carry with us the knowledge, values, and skills that allow us to function within the particular way of life of that group.

Individuals who flee their native cultures and find themselves in refugee camps exist to a large degree in a different culture. This point deserves a more thorough examination than is possible here. We can, however, immediately acknowledge that the camp environment represents a uniquely different social system which demands its own patterns of behavior and fosters its own attitudes and feelings.

Most of our students have lived in this refugee culture for several years. For many of the younger children, refugee culture and native culture are one and the same. Moreover, most of our students have entered this new environment with the expectation that their new way of living represents a permanent change in their lives, not a temporary one. Thus, the adjustments they have made in the camps foreshadow the changes they must make once again after their arrival in the U.S. One observer of cultural adjustment, S. N. Eisenstadt (1954), sees the following four stages in the nature of the adjustment process:

- acquisition of language, norms, roles, and customs;
- learning new roles to meet new situations;
- development of new identity and status-image;

- movement from participation in the institutions of the ethnic group to participation in the institutions of the new society/culture.

For those of us involved in CO instruction, being aware of the adjustments made by our students has become extremely important. The process of flight and of making these adjustments has given our students a new set of knowledge, skills, and experiences on which we can build.

Overcoming the Barriers

There are barriers that tend to separate teacher from student. These are the interpersonal, intercultural, or institutional barriers that distort or prevent effective communication within the classroom. To the degree that these barriers have been recognized and overcome, our understanding of our students has increased, and our training efforts have become more effective.

As adult learners, [our students] have been encouraged to share in the responsibility for program planning and for their own learning.

The first barrier that our staff had to overcome was that of traditional teacher-student roles. There are certain aspects of these roles that no one would want to see disappear – courtesy and respect in the classroom between teacher and students is certainly one example. There are other aspects which proved less helpful in our attempts to know our students better and provide more effective instruction. Traditional Southeast Asian roles often set the teacher up as a possessor and dispenser of knowledge. Students are not encouraged to enlarge upon what the teacher says, let alone be critical of it. In the extreme, the result may be a passive learning role on the part of the student. The teacher, on the other hand, must make assumption after assumption about what it is that students should be told. Teachers have recognized the folly of this approach and have continually sought to overcome this barrier by providing students with opportunities to express themselves in the classroom. This has allowed the teacher to pinpoint student needs more effectively. It has also provided everyone, teacher and students alike, with the opportunity to share their own perspectives and insights. In effect, everyone has become a possessor and dispenser of knowledge in the process of sharing with one another.

Program design presents yet another potential barrier to understanding our students. In order to better meet logistical concerns and overall student needs, students are assigned to an instructional level on the basis of an ESL placement test. There is indeed some relationship between students' ESL ability and their familiarity with CO content. But perhaps the two variables are related more directly to the students' educational attainment or exposure to western influences than to each other. Whatever the case, teachers have learned to see beyond ESL ability in assessing a student's knowledge of cultural adjustment.

Teachers have become aware of another barrier between students and staff that exists, though it is rather difficult to define. It may be seen in the students' sudden shift in behavior when they turn from discussing something among themselves to address an approaching teacher. Before the teacher joins the group, there is a maturity, an intelligence, and a self-assurance that seems to vanish when the outsider approaches. The use of native language rather than a second language is one important factor. Individuals within the group are likely to address the teacher in English. For the students, more often than not, there is a struggle and frustration in attempting to express themselves in another language. But teachers and staff are no longer misled when students who have a simple grasp of a second language sound hesitant or simplistic. Their thinking and analysis is as complex as always; it is simply held within by their lack of proficiency in English. There are, however, other causes for this change in behavior than just communicative ability. Students sometimes assume that others from outside their own cultural groups cannot appreciate or comprehend the feelings, attitudes, and concerns which underpin their discussions, and so they make no attempt to convey them. They may also hesitate to express opinions which might cause others to disagree or object.

As staff have worked to overcome these barriers and have come to better understand their students, a clear image of our students as adult learners has emerged. As adult learners, our students have been encouraged to share in the responsibility for program planning and for their own learning.

Trend 2: Shift in Instructional Content

It was mentioned earlier that the CO component of the program is based on a set of regional standards or guidelines. These standards specify what informational content should be included in the

curriculum at each of the program sites. Providing information about life in America has always been a major focus for CO instruction. Yet providing this information is not without its difficulties. What topics are important? What level of specificity is appropriate? How can one allow for regional or local variations in the U.S. and provide for adequate updates? How can one carry out a fact-giving approach in a class full of individuals, each with his or her own concerns, each possibly heading for a different American community? At a more general level, do training camps provide the best opportunity for transmitting specific bits of information about American culture or can they offer something else? We decided on the "something else."

The informational approach to teaching about American culture has given way to the second major trend: the shift in instructional content from primarily information-giving to one incorporating a balance of information, skills and attitudes.

This new balance was summarized in a statement written by a group involved in the CO re-examination effort at Bataan. Here is that summary:

> Instructional content can be divided into three distinct but related areas: information, skills, and attitudes.
>
> Individuals are provided with *information* which is considered essential for their own and for their family's safety and immediate well-being. The information included further serves to provide a meaningful context through which skills and attitudes are taught.
>
> Skills training develops *specific skills* which are needed early in the resettlement process. These include such things as appropriate job interview behavior, use of the telephone, and the handling of U.S. currency. In addition, certain more general *strategies* are fostered. This is done by identifying certain life skills that individuals already possess and demonstrating how they can be applied to the cross-cultural adjustment process. Strategies to be fostered include observation and mimicking, problem-solving, and how to identify and use resources available in American communities.
>
> The last area of content is that of *attitude clarification and development*. Attitudes represent a tendency to act, think, or feel in a certain way. Instruction attempts to develop specific *attitudes* that ease or assist an individual's adjustment to a new culture. Some examples are flexibility, being non-judgmental, and taking responsibility for one's own actions. Instruction also attempts to develop an awareness that certain attitudes lead to ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that are more or less functional within a given cultural context. Learners explore how these attitudes may help or hinder their adjustment to American culture.

The same summary goes on to identify the factors which aid in the selection of appropriate instructional content. It states:

> There are three factors which guide the determination of instructional content. The first is the *risk factor*, that is, the determination of whether or not knowing or having certain information, attitudes, or skills will prove detrimental or harmful to the adjustment process.
>
> The second factor involves the examination of what is *most feasibly and efficiently taught* at the program site, far from the area in which resettlement will occur. This factor is a recognition, for example, that learning certain topics might best be delayed until the individual enters an environment that provides a more meaningful context for understanding.
>
> Finally, there are the *previous experiences and present expressed needs* of the refugees themselves in determining what they need to know. Previous experiences help us assess what our students already know, or how they may interpret what we are trying to communicate to them. The expressed needs of our students is a consideration in addressing their interest and motivation.

The emerging trend [is] toward a generalized cross-cultural preparation.

It should not be assumed that the general content shift described above represents a retreat from an instructional emphasis that is somehow preferable but less obtainable. A strict adherence to an information-giving approach in CO is fraught with difficulties. At its best, it provides students with a set of generalizations about what they will experience in America, or what they should do in a given situation. But it falls short in its efforts because it cannot take into account the almost infinite variety of ways of life in the U.S. Nor can it predict which factors in a given situation will prove most meaningful or important to each refugee newcomer. At worst, it can be misleading and create unrealistic expectations. The informational approach aims at providing individuals with packaged answers to a variety of questions or situations. As in the scriptural metaphor, this approach becomes a provider of fishes, without ever attempting to teach its recipients to fish for themselves.

The emerging trend in providing the more balanced emphasis in CO instruction has, in a sense,

moved pre-arrival training toward a more generalized cross-cultural preparation. There are some obvious benefits in this. The balanced approach allows our students to see and understand their own feelings and experiences in a different, more useful light. Equally important, it allows our teachers to bring their own extensive experiences to bear on the issues of cross-cultural adjustment. This is an important factor in the third major trend.

Trend 3: Teacher as Cross-Cultural Trainer

It was mentioned earlier that there are some inherent advantages in a training arrangement in which Filipinos (or Thais or Indonesians) teach Southeast Asian refugees about American culture. Those advantages are evident in the third major trend to be examined: the emerging role of the teacher as cross-cultural trainer.

The emergence of this role parallels the general shift in CO instructional content from primarily information-giving to one of a more balanced blend of information, skills, and attitudes. If the purposes of CO were to simply provide information, then teachers – all local nationals – would be relegated to the role of conveyers-of-information. A majority of the teaching staff has never been to the U.S. In order to provide accurate information about life there, they would need to absorb as many facts as their students do. Facts would need to flow from resource (texts or American cultural informants) to teacher to student with little modification along the way. There also remain all the other difficulties inherent in this kind of approach as described above.

However, as the curriculum shifts its focus to include skills and attitudes, an important opportunity has presented itself. As CO focuses less on fact and more on general cross-cultural preparation, the teacher's own first-hand experiences become more meaningful and relevant. The program now allows staff to tap their own experiences in adapting to or interacting with individuals and environments that are culturally diverse. All of our staff, just by virtue of working at PRPC, have this kind of experience, and so have most of our students. For the program, the question has become: what can we do to help teachers and students see this cross-cultural experience, think about it, learn from it, and finally, share it with each other?

Another important benefit in this shift is that the teacher as cross-cultural trainer has a well-defined role in the field of intercultural communication. This position provides for an improved perspective on a number of concepts and models developed or used within the field, and which have been readily incorporated into CO instruction. Examples include culture shock, cultural "baggage", and adaptation/adjustment models. The position also provides the teacher with clearer professional directions and career opportunities.

Perhaps most significant is that teachers as cross-cultural trainers provide students with important role models. Teachers can be seen as Asians, working alongside their western colleagues, toward mutual understanding and productivity. This cooperation is not accomplished instantly, but instead requires deliberate and ongoing effort. It is this same kind of effort that will serve our students best as newcomers in the U.S.

Looking Ahead

The major trends that have been discussed in this paper have helped shape the foundations on which newer CO directions rest. The details of these newer directions are numerous and outside the scope of this paper. They are, however, the next chapter of the story to be told from Bataan.

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